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Improving Rural Newspaper Coverage of Nutrition Stories: An Educational Assessment of Editors' Attitudes and Learning Needs

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Abstract

Local newspapers are an important source of information for rural residents but often lack accurate or helpful nutrition-related information. To improve the quantity and quality of nutrition stories in rural, local newspapers, it is important to understand the perspective of editors. An online survey of 51 rural Midwest editors was conducted to assess attitudes toward writing nutrition stories, sources of information, perceived challenges, and interest in learning more about writing such stories. Of respondents, 49% were female, and 63% had at least a 4-year college degree. Through a mix of closed- and open-ended questions, the majority indicated positive attitudes toward nutrition stories, were confident in their abilities to write them, and expressed interest in learning more. Challenges cited include lack of print space, small staff, lack of specific requests from readers for nutrition stories, and the need to avoid offending local agricultural businesses. Results should be useful in planning an educational intervention for editors. Meanwhile, public health practitioners should provide concise press releases to their local newspapers about their activities. Also, greater expressions of appreciation from public health professionals and other readers may lead to higher prioritization of nutrition-related stories, and ultimately to an environment more supportive of healthy eating.

Keywords

nutrition; newspapers; rural; media

INTRODUCTION

The obesity epidemic is apparent in all states, including those in the Midwest. About 64% of adult Iowans are overweight or obese, and the picture is worse in rural counties, at 73% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Much attention has focused on the impact of social and physical environmental factors on eating behaviors that lead to overweight (Booth et al., 2001; Casey et al., 2008). It is understood that changing dietary

habits is complex and that interventions targeting any single environmental factor are unlikely to solve the entire problem of obesity. However, progress may be made when, over time, a constellation of effective interventions converge to create a more supportive social and physical environment for healthy eating.

Various forms of media may contribute to this environment. Even though people increasingly go to the Internet for information (Beckjord et al., 2007; Fox, 2006), recent reports show that local newspapers are still among the most important means for residents in the United States to get nutrition information (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2008; Franklin, 2008; Viswanath, Randolph Steele, & Finnegan, 2006). A 2010 survey found that 86% of rural adult Iowans of all ages read a newspaper each week (Iowa Newspaper Association, 2010). Therefore, local newspapers will likely remain one of the major sources of food and nutrition information for rural residents and could be targeted for intervention. In addition, older adults are disproportionately represented in the rural Midwest, and some research suggests that they prefer to receive health information in written form (McKay, Houser, Blumberg, & Goldberg, 2006).

BACKGROUND

Nutrition knowledge is positively related to adults making healthful food choices (Beydoun, Powell, & Wang, 2009). Persons exposed to health information through media can experience increased knowledge, and changes in decision making and behavior (Andreassen, Randers, Naslund, Stockeld, & Mattiasson, 2005; Warner & Procaccino, 2004). Other studies suggest that exposure to media increases overall nutritional knowledge (Charlton, Brewitt, & Bourne, 2004). Nutrition-related stories may take many forms, including coverage of nutrition research, stories of local health promotion efforts, or featured recipes. The content of newspapers is determined by many factors, with editors serving as key decision makers (Schudson, 1989). The staff at small, local newspapers often comprises only a few employees, making the editor relatively more central than at large, metropolitan newspapers. A limited number of studies have analyzed the stories about food and nutrition in local media (including newspapers) in the United States. These studies show that local media stories are not always helpful in terms of promoting healthy dietary behaviors: Local media stories cover a limited number of topics, such as body fat; they are more likely to cover foods less recommended by national agencies; (Borra, Earl, & Hogan, 1998); they often provide oversimplified explanations about complex concepts of nutrition; (Allen, 1995); and they seldom use nutrition experts or dieticians as news sources (Allen, 1995; Woodruff, Dorfman, Berends, & Agron, 2003). Researchers have concluded that health news overall in the United States is often superficial and not balanced (Hampl, 2004).

To influence rural newspapers to include a greater number of and more accurate stories about healthy eating, it is essential to understand opportunities and constraints from the perspective of editors. This study used an online survey of editors at local newspapers in rural Iowa to determine their knowledge of reliable and accurate sources of nutrition information, their interest in improving nutrition-related content, and their perspective on barriers to doing so. Survey content was guided by elements of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2004), specifically, the triadic determinants of “person” (e.g., knowledge and

attitudes, including self-efficacy and outcome expectations), “behavior” (e.g., decision making and information-seeking), and “environment” (e.g., institutional and social factors affecting behavior). Improving the quality and quantity of nutrition-related content in newspapers in rural communities could serve as an effective strategy toward improving dietary knowledge and, ultimately, behaviors among the residents. Indirectly, more informed and confident editors may be inclined to give newspaper coverage to nutrition-promoting programs in a community. The findings of this study will be used to develop a future intervention study designed to assist local newspapers to deliver evidence-based nutrition information in their news stories and to be advocates for improving the nutrition environment in their local communities.

We hypothesized that editors would be interested in learning more about at least some aspects of writing nutrition-related stories and that structural factors (e.g., time, column space) would be important barriers to writing such stories.

METHOD

Sample Selection and Recruitment

All study methods were approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board. Potential study participants were selected using a publicly available, online database provided by the Iowa Newspaper Association. Entries typically listed the address of the newspaper, its circulation, whether it was a daily or weekly, and the name of the editor(s) with e-mail and/ or website contact information. The target sample size was 166 newspapers. With an assumed response rate of 60%, the resulting sample of 100 completed surveys would provide a sample error of 6.9%, with a 95% confidence interval for responses that are proportional. Response assumptions were based on previous work in similar communities and the offer of \$20 remuneration for this relatively short, web-based survey.

Excluding nonrural counties (those with a population >50,000) resulted in a list of 256 newspapers (26 dailies, 236 weeklies) from 88 (of 99) counties. Next, where the same editor was listed for more than one newspaper, the first alphabetically listed newspaper was selected and the others excluded. Also excluded were newspapers for which no editor was listed or no e-mail contact information was available. One newspaper was excluded because it was published by a farm organization. This series of exclusions resulted in 196 newspapers (15 dailies, 181 weeklies). All dailies were selected for inclusion in the study, and then, to reach the desired total of 166 newspapers, 151 weeklies were selected from each alphabetically ordered county, with up to 3 total (dailies and/or weeklies) selections for each county.

A letter was sent through postal mail informing the selected editors of the nature of the study and providing all elements of consent. The letter stated that in approximately 10 days, editors would be sent an e-mail containing a hyperlink to the survey and that this e-mail would be followed by up to two reminders (2 weeks apart) if they had not completed the survey. Editors were asked to contact the investigators if they did not want to receive the e-mail. After participants completed the survey, a check for \$20 was mailed to them.

Measures

The survey content was guided by elements of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2004). In particular, it addressed the constructs of self-efficacy (confidence in one's behavior) and outcome expectations (expected results of one's behavior, particularly with regard to readers), with additional questions that could elicit factors in the social or physical environment important to the behavior of writing nutrition stories. The survey questions were developed after a review of relevant research literature, followed by preliminary, semistructured telephone interviews with four rural newspaper editors. Questions were then slightly revised, entered into Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT), and reviewed in online form for face and content validity and ease of use by two additional editors and two journalism professors who were former newspaper reporters. Minor modifications were then made to produce the final survey instrument, which contained 34 questions.

Demographic and other characteristics were assessed, including age, gender, highest level of education completed (high school, some college, 2-year degree, 4-year degree, graduate school), race (Hispanic or Latino, yes/no), ethnicity, and any special training with regard to health reporting (yes/no; if yes, describe). To assess aspects of the rural newspaper environment, participants were asked to indicate how many years they have worked as a reporter and/or editor, how many people are employed at the newspaper including themselves, and how many of these could potentially write or contribute to nutrition stories. Data on newspaper circulation and on whether the newspaper was a daily or weekly were obtained from the Iowa Newspaper Association website for both respondents and nonrespondents, and gender for nonrespondents was assumed by the name listed on the site and/or a Google.image search.

General attitudes toward nutrition stories were assessed with two questions asking how important it is to have stories about healthy eating in newspapers, and how interested readers are in the topic of healthy eating ("not at all," "somewhat," or "very"). To assess *outcome expectations*, participants were asked, "How likely is it that your stories about nutrition will encourage readers to eat healthier?" ("not at all," "somewhat," or "very"). Participants were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with two statements: "I am encouraged by readers to include nutrition-related stories in our newspaper" and "Most readers respond positively to stories about healthy eating" ("strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree"). For these and the following items, higher scores indicate more positive responses.

Five items assessed *self-efficacy* related to writing nutrition stories. Beginning with the stem "How confident are you . . ." these assessed ability to interpret a news release containing results from a nutrition-related study, localize a national or state story about healthy eating, write stories covering community events that are designed to encourage healthy eating, write about local or state policies related to healthy eating, and find accurate nutrition information that can be included in stories you write ("not at all," "somewhat," or "very" confident).

Participants were asked to indicate their *interest in learning more* (via webinar) about each of the five topics addressed in the self-efficacy questions ("not at all," "a little," "moderately," or "very" interested). Participants were also asked to describe any other topics

related to healthy eating that they would like to learn more about. Next, participants were asked how likely they would be to attend a free webinar about how to write accurate stories about healthy eating, and how to localize them (“not at all,” “somewhat,” or “very likely”). Participants were then asked to indicate their preferences for the format of such a program (check all that apply): case studies, presentations by experts, documents with summarized information, question and answer, and other (fill in).

Participants were asked to indicate how often they use the following *sources* for stories about healthy eating: local health department, state health department, local hospital, wire service, local colleges or universities, and government websites (“never,” “occasionally,” “very often”). In addition, two separate items asked how often they actively seek health-related topics to cover, and topics about healthy eating in particular (“almost never,” “occasionally,” or “very often”). In an open-ended question, participants were asked what *challenges*, if any, they see in reporting on healthy eating.

Analysis

Data were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS (Version 20, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, 2011). There were no missing data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, mean, distribution). Respondents and nonrespondents were compared for gender distribution, proportion of newspapers that were dailies/weeklies, and newspaper circulation, using chi-square or *t* tests as appropriate. Gender and age-group differences were assessed using chi-square or *t* tests as appropriate, with age-groups constructed as 25 to 40 years, 41 to 50 years, and 51 years and older ($n = 15, 18, 18$, respectively). In addition, Spearman correlations were calculated to examine the association between self-efficacy and interest in learning more about each of the five topic areas assessed in these items.

Qualitative data consisted of short answers to open-ended questions. Each question was reviewed for common themes by two research team members, and consensus was reached.

RESULTS

Of the 166 introductory letters mailed, 5 were returned as undeliverable. No e-mails returned as undeliverable. A total of 51 completed surveys were received, which corresponds to a 32% response rate. There were no statistically significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents with regard to gender distribution, proportion of daily versus weekly newspapers, or newspaper circulation. The mean time spent taking the survey was 9 minutes ($SD = 8.1$) according to Qualtrics-generated data.

Characteristics of respondents and their newspapers are listed in Table 1. Approximately half of the respondents were female, and only one did not have at least some college education. Nearly all reported having no special training in health reporting; however, respondents reported over 17 years of experience, on average, as a reporter/editor. All respondents self-identified as non-Hispanic White. Characteristics of the newspapers reflect their small size in terms of total number of employees and the number who would

potentially write nutrition-related stories. The majority (88.2%) of respondents were employed at weekly newspapers.

Nearly all respondents (94.1%) indicated that it is “somewhat” or “very important” to have stories about healthy eating in newspapers, and 100% indicated that readers are “somewhat” or “very interested” in the topic of healthy eating. With regard to *outcome expectations*, 88.2% indicated it is “somewhat” or “very likely” that their stories about nutrition would encourage readers to eat healthier. In addition, 43.1% of respondents agreed with the statement “I am encouraged by readers to include nutrition-related stories in our newspaper,” whereas 56.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and none indicated they strongly agreed. In regard to the statement “Most readers respond positively to stories about healthy eating,” 80% indicated they “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” Results from the assessment of *self-efficacy* are shown in Table 2. Respondents appeared to be most confident in their abilities to write stories covering community events designed to encourage healthy eating habits and to localize a state or national story about healthy eating. They expressed somewhat less confidence in writing about local or state policies related to healthy eating and in finding accurate nutrition information. For all five items, very few indicated they were “not at all confident” in their ability.

Table 3 shows results from the assessment of *interest in various webinar topics*. Although there were no dramatic differences in interest across topics, there was somewhat more interest in where to find accurate nutrition information and writing stories covering community events designed to encourage healthy eating habits. Of least interest was learning how to interpret a news release containing results from a nutrition-related study. Spearman correlations between self-efficacy and level of interest regarding each topic were all negative (range = $-.01$ to $-.21$), indicating that lower self-efficacy for writing about a topic was associated with greater interest in learning more about it. However, none of these were statistically significant ($p < .05$). A few respondents indicated other topics of interest including costs of healthy food, gardening, supplements, county-level health data, and how to report accurately on nutrition stories that might conflict with interests of advertisers or local agricultural organizations. Sixty-nine percent of respondents stated they would be “somewhat” or “very” interested in attending a free webinar about writing accurate stories related to healthy eating and how to localize them. The most preferred format for this event was provision of documents with summarized information (69%), followed by presentations by experts (55%), a question/answer period (43%), and case studies (41%).

The frequency of using various *sources* of information for newspaper stories about healthy eating is shown in Table 4. Local hospitals and clinics, as well as local health departments, were reported to be used most frequently as sources, whereas the wire service, colleges and universities, and the state health department were used less frequently. Editors who provided examples of other sources most often reported local health and fitness professionals, school professionals, and health coalition members. Eighty-eight percent stated that they “occasionally” or “very often” seek out health-related topics to cover in their stories, whereas 64% stated that they occasionally or very often seek out topics related to healthy eating.

When asked to describe *challenges* in reporting on healthy eating topics, a number of themes emerged. Respondents often indicated that they did not have adequate space in the newspaper for such stories or adequate staff time to write them. Related to this were comments that such stories were often not a priority because of the time and effort to produce them. Many also perceived a lack of specific interest on the part of readers; one editor noted, for example, “Rarely do we get unsolicited feedback from readers on healthy eating stories.” Another frequently mentioned concern was localizing stories with a human interest “angle” that would be appealing to readers. Several also expressed concern about writing stories on healthy eating without offending advertisers such as fast-food restaurants or other local agricultural business interests. An example of this was “Coverage of ‘pink slime’ when meat producers’ interests had to be balanced against the idea that consumers have a right to know exactly what they are eating.”

Some gender and age group differences in responses were found. Women editors were more likely than men to report that stories about healthy eating are important ($p = .03$), that nutrition stories would encourage readers to eat healthy ($p = .04$), and that they were interested in learning more about localizing stories ($p = .04$) and how to write about local or state policies related to healthy eating ($p = .04$). Women had significantly more years of experience at their newspaper ($p = .04$) and were older ($p = .01$). Older respondents were more likely to use the local health department for sources of healthy eating stories ($p = .01$), were more interested in learning about localizing stories ($p = .02$), and were more likely to be interested in the free webinar ($p = .04$).

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that editors of rural newspapers think that healthy eating is an important topic and that they feel fairly confident in their abilities to report on this subject. At the same time, the majority also seem open to the idea of improving their knowledge and skills through some form of educational program. It has been noted that one of the reasons for misinformation in media stories about health is the lack of knowledge about health issues among reporters (Schwitzer et al., 2005), which is likely greater among reporters at local newspapers. Other studies have found that few local journalists who are in charge of writing health and nutrition stories have had formal training in public health (Tanner, 2004).

However, national data have shown general interest in educational offerings among newspaper editors and reporters. The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky conducted a survey of 137 rural newspapers in the United States to identify training needs (Cross, Fielder, Tigas, & Barnes, 2007). Only 11% of the editors responded that they have not supported any training. Most previous training programs were about technical skills such as layout and design. However, newspaper executives or publishers wanted to provide issue-specific training to staff, including training in health-related issues.

The present study suggests that a program should address sources of accurate nutrition information, as well as ways to write brief, positive, and accurate stories that will not offend local business interests. For example, editors could be shown credible public health websites that provide brief “tips for healthy eating” stressing inclusion of fruits and vegetables rather

than avoidance of meat. Case studies demonstrating the localization of national or state stories may also be helpful. Interest and participation in such a program may depend on factors other than those assessed here, including the qualifications of expert speakers and the exact length and convenience of the program. Pilot testing of an educational intervention for this population should be done to further refine the specific focus and delivery modes that would be of interest and would be effective in bringing about behavior change on the part of the editors.

Although this study has implications for an educational intervention for editors, there are also some implications for practitioners working with local newspapers. Many editors stated that they receive little encouragement from readers to include stories regarding healthy eating. It may be helpful for public health practitioners to not only provide concise, well-written press releases to their local newspapers about their activities but also express strong and sincere appreciation when these and other health-promoting stories are actually published. Public health practitioners should also offer their expertise to editors so that national or state news stories could be translated to the local level in some way. In addition, greater appreciation from readers may lead to higher prioritization of health-promoting, nutrition-related stories.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size and response rate, though the sample appears to have been fairly representative in terms of gender, as well as newspaper characteristics for this area. In addition, these results may not generalize to other areas of the country or to media markets in other parts of the world. Some challenges to writing nutrition stories that were identified in this study cannot be easily addressed through an educational intervention, for example, lack of adequate newspaper staff and political pressures to avoid certain types of stories.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into the perspectives and learning needs of rural newspaper editors that may be helpful in designing an educational intervention to increase the quantity and quality of nutrition stories in these newspapers. Findings suggest recommendations for practitioners with regard to their interactions with their local newspaper editors. Although increasing the coverage and accuracy of nutrition-related stories will not, alone, solve the obesity epidemic, it has the potential to contribute to an environment that is more supportive of healthy choices.

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TABLE 1Characteristics of Respondents and Their Newspapers ($N = 51$)

Characteristic	<i>M (SD) or n (%)</i>
Mean age (<i>SD</i>)	46.6 (12.3)
Gender, <i>n (%)</i>	
Male	26 (51.0)
Female	25 (49.0)
Education completed, <i>n (%)</i>	
High school	1 (2.0)
Some college	10 (19.6)
2-year degree	8 (15.7)
4-year degree	26 (51.0)
Graduate school	6 (11.8)
Received special training with regard to health reporting	
Yes	1 (2.0)
No	50 (98.0)
Mean years worked as an editor or reporter (<i>SD</i>)	17.8 (12.5)
Mean number of employees at newspaper (<i>SD</i>)	9.5 (12.0)
Mean number of employees who could write nutrition stories (<i>SD</i>)	2.2 (1.5)
Mean circulation of the newspaper (<i>SD</i>)	2381.7 (2460.8)
Type of newspaper (%)	
Daily	6 (11.8)
Weekly	45 (88.2)

TABLE 2Self-Efficacy for Aspects of Nutrition Reporting ($N = 51$)

How confident are you in your ability to	<i>n</i> (%)
Interpret a news release containing results from a nutrition-related study?	
Not at all	1 (2.0)
Somewhat	22 (43.1)
Very	28 (54.9)
Localize a state or national story about healthy eating?	
Not at all	2 (3.9)
Somewhat	17 (33.3)
Very	32 (62.8)
Write stories covering community events that are designed to encourage healthy eating habits?	
Not at all	1 (2.0)
Somewhat	7 (13.7)
Very	43 (84.3)
Write about local or state policies that are related to healthy eating?	
Not at all	2 (3.9)
Somewhat	29 (56.9)
Very	20 (39.2)
Find accurate nutrition information that could be included in stories your write?	
Not at all	4 (7.8)
Somewhat	20 (39.2)
Very	27 (52.9)

TABLE 3Level of Interest in Topics for a Webinar ($N = 51$)

Indicate your level of <i>interest</i> in the following topics for a webinar: how to	<i>n</i> (%)
Interpret a news release containing results from a nutrition-related study?	
Not at all	19 (37.3)
A little	16 (31.4)
Moderately	13 (25.5)
Very	3 (5.9)
Localize a state or national story about healthy eating?	
Not at all	15 (29.4)
A little	15 (29.4)
Moderately	14 (27.5)
Very	7 (13.73)
Write stories covering community events that are designed to encourage healthy eating habits?	
Not at all	16 (31.4)
A little	12 (23.5)
Moderately	17 (33.3)
Very	6 (11.8)
Write about local or state policies that are related to healthy eating?	
Not at all	15 (29.4)
A little	16 (31.4)
Moderately	13 (25.5)
Very	7 (13.7)
Find accurate nutrition information that could be included in stories your write?	
Not at all	11 (21.6)
A little	15 (29.4)
Moderately	18 (35.3)
Very	7 (13.7)

TABLE 4

Frequency of Using Various Sources of Information for Newspaper Stories About Healthy Eating

Source	<i>n</i> (%)
Local health department	
Never	7 (13.7)
Occasionally	28 (54.9)
Very often	16 (31.4)
State health department	
Never	17 (33.3)
Occasionally	31 (60.8)
Very often	3 (5.9)
Local hospital or clinic	
Never	2 (3.9)
Occasionally	25 (49.0)
Very often	24 (47.1)
Wire service	
Never	32 (62.8)
Occasionally	13 (25.5)
Very Often	6 (11.8)
Colleges or universities	
Never	17 (33.3)
Occasionally	33 (64.7)
Very often	1 (2.0)
Government website (e.g., U.S. Department of Agriculture, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)	
Never	6 (11.8)
Occasionally	36 (70.6)
Very often	9 (17.7)